

# Transnational Ulster and labouring-class self-fashioning

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## Introduction

Romantic-period labouring-class poetic activity in Ulster followed close on the heels of the general British literary enthusiasm for vernacular and bardic poetry, particularly that which originated in the Celtic ‘margins’ of Britain. Since the popularity of English labouring-class poet Stephen Duck (1705-1756), the phenomenon of the labouring-class poet, though admittedly often problematic in terms of class identity, opened up the literary marketplace to the non-classically-educated. With the celebrity of Robert Burns (1759-1796), following the mid-century burgeoning interest in Celticism, the focus on natural, ‘heaven-taught’ inspiration underwent a national and local inflection. When compared with their middle-class contemporaries William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, labouring-class figures like Robert Burns and John Clare (1793-1864) have been less readily associated with intentional Romantic poetic theory; yet the prefatory, often ‘regional’, poses of labouring-class poets offer insight into poetic self-conception, albeit indirectly. In an article which examines Burns’s use of language as a means of national self-construction, Jeremy Smith concludes that ‘Burns loved to pose’ (Smith, ‘Copia Verborum’ 73).

Subsequent critics have since pointed to the ‘ploughman poet’s masterful ability to adopt intricate and destabilising personae in his poems, code-switching between Standard English, Standard Scottish and broad vernacular Scots (Broadhead, *Language* 20-29). Though today it is more or less commonplace to assert that Burns’s image as a national bard was partly self-fashioned, the persona of ‘[t]he simple Bard, rough at the rustic plough’ (R. Burns, ‘Brigs of Ayr’, l. 1, 226) was rarely questioned by contemporaries or editors as anything other than an accurate account of Burns’s identity, let alone his sense of artistic mission. More recent criticism, such as that of Gerard Carruthers, Nigel Leask, Murray Pittock and Fiona Stafford (*Burns and Other Poets*) has argued forcefully that Burns represents a Romantic incarnation of the self-fashioning labouring-class figure as national bard. This figure of regional, and later national, significance not only paved the way for writers like Walter Scott (1771-1832) who would put Scotland on the international literary map, but also for other aspiring poets across the regions of Ireland and Britain who sought to create innovative poetry partly in their

own vernacular dialects and languages, not least the Ulster Romantic circle who form the subject of this study.

### **Class, Nation and Identity: Ulster poetry and the 'heaven-taught' ploughman**

From the start, Burns' birl and rhythm, *traditional music note*  
That tongue the Ulster Scots brought wi' them  
And stick to still in County Antrim  
Was in my ear.  
From east of Bann it westered in  
On the *Derry air*.  
(Seamus Heaney, 'A Birl for Burns' (1998), ll. 1–6 in Gifford, 2009)

The reader familiar with Scottish poetry will note that Seamus Heaney's 'A Birl for Burns' (1998), written as it is in the distinctive six-line Scottish stanza form of 'Standard Habbie', is immediately recognisable within the genre of Scottish mock elegy, typified by Allan Ramsay's mock 'Elegy on Maggy Johnston'. It is often known more generally as the 'Burns stanza' from its popularised form in some of Burns's most famous poems 'To a Mouse' and 'To a Louse', in which he expanded the use of the form to more serious, Enlightenment subjects such as self-awareness and man's moral position in society. The flexibility of the form has been exploited by poets of various nationalities throughout the centuries and, though Heaney's poem has the essence of formal pioneering, he was by no means the first Irish poet to adopt the form. Heaney's poem is a personal celebration of linguistic and cultural shared origins; a newly discovered synergy of working-class cultures that at first seemed foreign, even opposed. Both Burns and Heaney shared labouring-class heritage as the sons of farmers, and both were influenced by Scots vocabulary spoken in their native communities, but, having felt the responsibility in his earlier career to speak on behalf of his own Roman Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, it was all the more significant that Heaney chose to celebrate what he once might have been viewed as the language and culture of his neighbouring 'colonisers'. Nowhere is this tender sympathetic appreciation more evident than in his depiction of the respectful Protestant neighbour in 'The Other Side', echoing what Gerry Carruthers describes as Burns's sympathetic portrayal of the Presbyterian patriarch and rural family piety in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' (G. Carruthers, *Robert Burns* 33).

That Heaney, a poet of a post-modern era, should resist a rigid national paradigm ought not to be surprising, since throughout the twentieth century sociological theories of transnationalism have exerted considerable influence on the re-categorisation of literatures, particularly those

which do not fit neatly into nineteenth century, ethno-nationalist paradigms based on majority self-determination. The literature of ‘long’ eighteenth-century Ulster, that which was contemporaneous with the Scottish writings of Allan Ramsay and Robert Burns, has more recently been recognised as a precursor to modern transnationalism, or as Jim Kelly has described it, ‘the clearest example of [Romantic] transnational conversation’ (J. Kelly, *Irish University Review* 444). Here, the theoretical term is employed in a positive sense to denote the particular cultural, confessional and linguistic hybridity of the Ulster’s shared identity; one which combines multifarious cultures which have shaped the island as a whole; notably Gaelic Irish, Scots (*Lallans*), Ulster-Scots (*Ullans*), English, Anglo-Irish and since the 1920s, Northern Irish elements. As this chapter will elucidate, Irishness and Scottishness were not the only national influences at work in Romantic-period Ulster, especially as the province increasingly opened up to global migration and considerable waves of emigration, mostly of Protestant Dissenters to America during the early Eighteenth Century. Heaney’s poetic recognition of Burns might therefore be seen as an important stage in a long process of forgetting, rediscovering, recognising and eventual disinterring of Ulster’s transnational culture.

This culture originates specifically in labouring-class poetic movements that lived and worked in communities that spoke the Ulster variant of Scottish vernacular, ‘the tongue the Ulster Scots brought with them’ (Heaney, ‘Birl’, l. 2), that which was also spoken in Burns’s Ayrshire. This shared linguistic culture existed alongside deeper ingrained value-systems such as Dissenting confessional and political identities, literary and folk music traditions. Like Burns, Ulster Scots poets often wrote in Standard English, but made selective use of a literary form of Scots on a metapragmatic level to serve the functional demands of intended audiences. Such linguistic ‘codeswitching’ allowed for different kinds of content to be mediated to different audiences, defying generic and class expectation and even deliberately upsetting received understandings of language for political purposes. The georgic poems ‘To a Hedgehog’ (1799) and ‘To the Potatoe’ (1804) of Samuel Thomson (1766-1816) and James Orr (1770-1816) respectively, deliberately overturn class and linguistic expectations to destabilise meaning and send coded political messages about Irish revolutionary politics to a knowing labouring-class audience. Such codeswitching also occurs in Heaney’s ‘Birl for Burns’ which, consciously or unconsciously, invokes a shared working-class cultural heritage that had been all but lost in the twentieth-century ‘teleology of partition’ that afflicted Ireland. Written in the wake of the Belfast Agreement which marked a halt to decades of

bitter conflict known as ‘the Troubles’, Heaney’s poem’s recognition of a hybrid northern cultural inheritance, inclusive of ‘planter’ and ‘native’ elements —‘the tongue the Ulster Scots brought with them’ floating in ‘on the *Derry air*’ (a well-known Irish nationalist ballad tune)—built upon the work of his Protestant poetic predecessors: John Hewitt (1907–87), the critic and broadcaster who had returned an entire tradition of radical Ulster Romantic poets to prominence; and W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), who was influenced by Northern Irish Romantic poet Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810–86).

Though a landed gentleman and author, Sir Samuel Ferguson’s own literary inheritance had its origins in a largely labouring-class poetic movement of previous generations, including Dissenting republicans discussed in this study Samuel Thomson, James Orr and Thomas Beggs (1789–1847). This labouring-class circle intersected with the politically conservative salon coterie of antiquarian Bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811) and, though Percy’s protégés were more prolific at the time, they are generally now less-well known than their labouring-class poetic contemporaries Orr and Thomson. Retrospectively, critics have noted an evolving ‘northern’ Irish literary tradition with its origins in the late Enlightenment and Age of Revolution, starting with the vernacular, labouring class poets of the Thomson circle.<sup>1</sup> This tradition, as many previous studies have emphasised (J. Orr, *Literary Networks*; C. Baraniuk, *James Orr*; F. Ferguson and A. Holmes eds. *Revising Robert Burns*; F. Ferguson and J. McConnel, *Ireland and Scotland*), represents a broad political and ideological spectrum that includes republicans, Unionists, liberals, conservatives, Marxists, plebeian writers and aristocrats, and poets from a range of confessional identities, though primarily Dissenting. Because of the quality of their poetry and, in part, because of their United Irish credentials, Orr and Thomson remain the most well-known Irish figures, with several individual studies dedicated to them. This article seeks to examine how they and other labouring-class members of the Thomson circle envisaged their identities as translocal and transnational, including metropolitan and even cosmopolitan figures.

Rural schoolmaster and poet Samuel Thomson was the instigating figure of this coterie, arguably the ‘father’ of Ulster’s Romantic movement, and I have discussed extensively his work and importance as a labouring class poet elsewhere. Just as Heaney would later explain

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<sup>1</sup> See Carol Baraniuk, ‘things tragic and bitter’: Samuel Ferguson, *Congal* and the northern Romantic tradition in *Forging the anchor: Samuel Ferguson and his legacy* ed. by Frank Ferguson and Jan Jedrzejewski (Dublin: Four Courts, forthcoming 2016)

Burns's poetic appeal for him in 'A Birl for Burns', Thomson offered the following expression of hybrid national identity:

Oft wild-wood Fancy restless roams,  
    Among her [Scotland's] well-sung, classic braes,  
Where our forefathers had their homes,  
    The hardy sons of other days. [...]

I love my native land, no doubt,  
    Attach'd to her thro' thick and thin;  
But tho' I'm IRISH all without,  
    I'm every item SCOTCH within. (Samuel Thomson, 'To Captain  
McDougall, Castle-Upton, with a copy of the author's poems' [1806], ll. 1-20)

For this Romantic-period poet, who identified as a bard speaking on behalf of his rural 'compeers' (Thomson, *Poems* 'Dedication'), hybrid identity was no less problematic than it was for Heaney, prompting his longing to be part of an imagined ancestral community. Clearly, for these poets, the idea of nation and home is not confined to a geographical space but embedded in a collective ancestral imagination that is also embodied in the landscape:

And still when inspiration comes  
    To my night thoughts and mid day dreams,  
'Tis from her breezy, willowy holms,  
    Romantic groves and winding streams. (ll. 9-12)

A note of caution must be sounded when considering the poem out of context. The full title of the poem 'To Captain McDougall, Castle-Upton, with a copy of the author's poems' reveals that Thomson intended the verses to accompany his previous volume of poems which were sent to a Scottish military patron. The reader might therefore be mindful of the self-fashioning topos so frequently found in the prefatory material of published volumes by members of his labouring-class circle. The poetic phrase that has come to be synonymous with the Ulster-Scots identity—'But tho' I'm IRISH all without, / I'm ev'ry item SCOTCH within' has been interpreted by some critics as a calculated literary pose in which Thomson seeks to reinforce the superiority of his Scottish ancestry over his birth in Ireland, more commonly that of the Scottish soul in an Irish body. This may, in part, explain Thomson's disappearance from literary prominence in the nineteenth century when, as Colin Kidd has

argued, Enlightenment thinkers in Scotland sought to disassociate a progressive modern Scotland from its barbaric Irish past (C. Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*); meanwhile, in Ireland, Anglo-Irish issues began to preoccupy the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, leading to the indiscriminate conflation of Scottish cultural influence with colonialism. Reading within a transnational context, it is persuasive to read the identification as 'IRISH all without ... / 'ev'ry item SCOTCH within' as a *bona fide* expression of hybrid identity which has its roots as far back as Scotland's 14<sup>th</sup> Century iconic king, Robert the Bruce, who identified a common Irish/Scottish identity—'one seed of birth'—born out of shared language and custom (S. Duffy, 'Bruce Brothers' 55-86). Thomson passed a copy of the Early Scots poem *The Brus* by John Barbour (c. 1320-1395) around his circle, a volume which remained popular in Ulster throughout the eighteenth-century (J. R. R. Adams, *Printed Word* 72). By the time 'To Captain McDougal' was published, Scotland was prospering economically under a contractual Union with England while Ireland had recently been subdued under force following the unsuccessful United Irish Rebellion of 1798 and consolidated as part of the United Kingdom in 1801. For Thomson, Irish and Scottish history and culture remained intertwined with the province of Ulster increasingly suspended between two nations whose political, economic and religious differences had begun to drive them apart. For a former United Irish sympathiser, expressing his faith in Ireland suggests stalwart national pride, while his celebration of Scottish cultural identity might also articulate faith in a nation's ability to retain its cultural autonomy under the attempted subjugation of their common enemy, England. The poem was published in Thomson's third volume *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect* (1806), a volume often considered to reflect both Thomson's waning political radicalism and increasing concern with spiritual, rather than national, identity. In this context, it is significant that 'To Captain McDougall' addresses the national question so directly, refusing to gloss over tensions in national identity while addressing itself to a Scottish, or at least Scottish-descended, military figure.

The claim that Ulster boasts its own legitimate language remains contested in spite of the European recognition of the Ullans (Ulster-Scots) language in the 1990s. The prefaces discussed reveal that by the 1840s the role of Scottishness in Irish literature was increasingly fraught and had taken on a political significance. Labouring-class prefaces from the second generation of the Thomson circle consistently seek to justify the choice of Scots as a distinctive, native dialect which originated firmly in the Irish nation. The Glenwherry poet Thomas Beggs, cousin of James Orr, attached a strongly-worded addendum to his unusually

brief preface to *The Minstrel's Offering* (1836). This volume followed on the heels of several poetic successes, so we may assume a degree of self-confidence in the poet's tone:

Should the reader of the following effusions suppose, that in some parts the Author has imitated the Scottish dialect,—he would wish to correct the idea, by alledging (sic) that he has written in *his own* style—in the language of his native glen—not constrained, but spontaneous as the lisplings of our first speech. (T. Beggs, *Minstrel's Offering*, 'Preface')

Wordsworth's marketing of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1803) as a collection which captured the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion' in 'the real language of men' is alluded to here by Beggs to justify the literary use of his spoken vernacular. By 1844 it was evident that this transnational identity could not be taken for granted. The County Down poet and artisan weaver Robert Huddleston of Moneyreagh (1814-89) prefaced his *Collection of Poems and Songs on rural Subjects* (1844) with a strongly-worded cultural defence of what he termed 'Ulster Irish':

Though hoarse and guttural, do me the honor to believe, that I am as willing as ever a bird in the Emerald Isle to sing; and, that my lays are original, if not harmonious. In Ulster Irish (which some in their unmeaning eccentricity may term Scotch, to tear even the credit of language from its mother home), I sing the most of my songs. Know, that until the 15th century, this was the ancient Scotia, and the now modern Scotland, only the minor plant; and it is a questionable point yet by some, but given in by all men of profound knowledge and erudition, that the inhabitants of Scotland are the descendants of the people of Erin. Then Erin must be the mother land. (R. Huddleston, *Poems*, ix)

In asserting the Irish genealogy of the Scots, drawing on the historical mythology of Dalriada, Huddleston put forth a counter-argument to the accusation levelled at the Ulster-Scots that they were a mere 'planter' tradition. His Preface also plays into the recent, almost- fifty-year cultural war that had occurred between scholars over the legitimacy of James Macpherson's Ossianic 'fragments' (Macpherson, *Poems*), and the subsequent Irish and Scottish debate over the 'ownership' of the Ossianic mythological and literary tradition. In addition to following the Thomson circle's practice of writing partly in dense Ulster-Scots, Huddleston also published his poetry according to the subscription process, a method by which community members and fellow poets could publicly pledge their willingness to purchase the volume upon its release. This method, favoured by working class poets in 1790s Belfast's

atmosphere of democratic potentiality, was evidently much less successful in nineteenth century Belfast, as noted by the weaver and poet Alexander M'Kenzie (1780-1839) who voiced his frustration as a labouring-class poet in a growing middle-class, mercantile Belfast:

Belfast is not the place where a man compelled to work for a living will be admitted into the company of those who possess literary attainments. They generally move in a higher sphere of society and would think themselves disgraced by noticing a poor serf though gifted with genius. [...] When I think on some young men in your own neighbourhood – namely [Jack] Williamson, [Samuel] Walker, Crowe and yourself, I cannot refrain [from] drawing a comparison rather disgraceful to the Northern Athens. (Andrew M'Kenzie –J. R. Semple, Moilena Turnpike, near Antrim, 9 Jul.1832, John Hewitt MA Thesis, Boxes 16 and 17, University of Ulster, MS D 3838/3/18/Acc/7015, f. 19.

In Huddleston's Victorian Irish context the topos of affected self-consciousness generally adopted in the preface by the 'labouring-class' poet preface gives way to the confident assertion of Irish cultural superiority. Huddleston evidently did not share Thomson's view that Irishness and Scottishness could be indistinct elements in Ulster identity. Instead he betrays anxiety that northern Irish writing, which reflected the vernacular elements of the Ulster culture, was increasingly mistaken for an affected Scottish dialect. Like Thomson's contemporary William Hamilton Drummond, who wrote the first Ulster epic *The Giant's Causeway, a Poem* (1811), Huddleston presents the Scots as a foreign power, though notably Drummond portrays them as barbaric colonisers:

From Albin oft, when darkness veiled the pole,  
Swift o'er the surge the tartaned plunderers stole,  
And Erin's vales with purple torrents ran,  
Beneath the claymores of the murd'rous clan;  
Till Cumhal's son, to Dalriada's coast,  
Led the tall squadrons of the Finnian host,  
Where his bold thought the wondrous plan designed,  
The proud conception of a giant mind,  
To bridge the ocean for the march of war,  
And wheel round Albin's shores his conquering car. (Drummond, *Giant's Causeway* 9)

In comparison to the cultural displacement described by Thomson in the hybrid identity 'IRISH all without ... ev'ry item SCOTCH within', Drummond and Huddleston each present Scotland as a culture to be kept at bay, subdued even, by the Irish. In short, both seek to



colonise Scottish culture and literary achievement as a product or export of Ireland.

Thomson's sensitive appreciation of hybridity would rarely be expressed again until the time of John Hewitt and Seamus Heaney.

### Other forms of transnationalism

One danger inherent in the critical fixation on the Scottish-Irish dimension of Ulster poetry is that it has tended to overshadow, even obscure, many other influences, not least the labouring-class links between weaver poets of Ulster and their contemporaries across the British Isles and in Revolutionary America. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the connections between Ulster poets and Revolutionary America, indeed a detailed work on the subject is long overdue, but one poem points to the conception of America as a pantisocratic haven amid an Irish industrial and political crisis. As the most widely published poet of the *Northern Star*, Samuel Thomson appears to have felt a bardic responsibility to write on behalf of his local community of textile weavers. Thomson was an exact contemporary to poet and naturalist Alexander Wilson (1766-1813), the Renfrewshire weaver who published a number of controversial attacks on linen owners such as 'The Shark' (1792) and, of further coincidence isn the fact that both poets published in newspapers under the pseudonym 'Lowrie Nettle' (Orr, *Literary Networks* 100). Thomson's poem 'The Bard's Farewell!' (1792) remains one of his best known, outspoken protest poems against both English protectionist legislation and the repression of free speech, urging his compatriots to emigrate to 'Columbia', leaving the 'vile Ascendancy' 'ravagers ... the unpeopl'd plain' (S. Thomson, *Poems* 49). The poem was significant not only because it was adopted as anti-ascendancy and anti-English propaganda by the United Irishmen, but also because it advocated an explicitly pacifist solution to the Irish question by encouraging proactive emigration, depriving the British state of exploitable Irish labour and colonial income. America, described as 'the land of light', is afforded a Promised Land status which offers sanctuary to the persecuted Irish Dissenter, described in Rousseau teams as 'ye *free-born souls* who *feel* and feel *aright*' (l. x). The contractarian religious identity of the community solidifies them beyond national boundaries, enabling them to flourish across the Atlantic where 'far-extending, boundless prospects lie / [and] sweet peace and liberty attend us'. The population is warned not to linger in Ireland where they are 'in voluntary fetters', but are instead exhorted to recognise their power to rid themselves of oppression. Thomson's 'voluntary fetters' suggests that Ireland's freedom will not be won by physical struggle, but a process of emancipation from mental slavery, comparable to William Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles' in 'London' which

symbolise the people's indoctrination by the social and religious hierarchy. Likewise, the soaring rhetoric of the poem seems to forshadow Percy Shelley's piece de resistance of radical pacifism *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) – 'Rise like lions after slumber, in unvanquishable number ... Ye are many, they are few'. It is particularly significant, then, that the poetry Thomson wrote in the traumatic aftermath of the Irish Rebellion uses the visionary genre so beloved by Blake and Shelley to reject political action. Thomson's policy of proactive emigration and faith in a transnational community based on Enlightenment and contractarian Presbyterian values could be seen as advocating retreat from the Irish national cause but, alternatively, it can be read it as offering a practical, transnational political solution which still retains the possibility that passive resistance will one day occasion 'songs of freedom' which will 'cheer [his] native Isle' (l. 56). The prospect of return to the motherland is left open to possibility, though only through undertaking a journey to a foreign land of opportunity. Though the poem retains the hope that Ireland's hills will once again be 'wreath'd in Shamrock', leaving the reader with an unmistakable nationalist image frequently used in contemporary United Irish poetry, Irish values must be aligned with the principles of freedom enjoyed in a New World. It is a set of values, then, and not the specific geographical space, that creates community.

Many of the challenges faced by Irish weavers were not confined to the national position of Ireland, since difficult economic circumstances and exploitative practices linked the Thomson circle to other radical groups of Dissenting poets in Scotland and North-West England. The connection between Ulster radical artisan movements and Lancashire cotton weavers, Yorkshire croppers and Nottingham framework knitters in England was identified by one of the earliest critics of John Hewitt's *Rhyming Weavers* (1974) anthology which first returned Thomson et al to prominence. The correspondent drew a comparison between the Ulster 'rhyming weavers' and their dialect-speaking counterparts in north-west England, whose nonconformist education 'gave rise to a fine [political] radicalism, deepened by the economic hardness of their lives' (Ronald M[?] to John Hewitt, 28 November 1950, quoted in J. Orr, *Literary Networks*, 100). The 'Cumberland balladeer' Robert Anderson, a calico weaver from Carlisle who settled for a time near Belfast, was the most prominent connection between the Thomson circle and the Cumbrian weaving trade. The literary and linguistic interchange between northern dialects, particularly those of Scotland and the north of England, created an affinity among northern English poets with Burns's Scots, the longevity of which is evidenced by several nineteenth- and twentieth-century song collections which

published Anderson's lyrics alongside those of Scottish and Irish contemporaries. W. Stewart of Grainger Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, published a joint edition of *Burns' Songs and Anderson's Cumberland Ballads* (c. 1838-c.1840), while Anthony Soulby of Penrith collected songs by Charles Dibdin, Robert Burns, Thomas Campbell, Robert Anderson and Robert Southey for *The Harmonist; or, Musical Olio, A choice Selection of new and much-approved songs; Also, several Cumberland Ballads, By Mr Anderson* (c.1803-c.1811). Ironically, the content of the songs chosen suggests that Soulby's criterion for a 'much approved' collection appeared to be strong anti-Napoleonic sentiment. In examining the Cumbrian bard Robert Anderson's 'Epistle to Burns' (1796) and his subsequent pilgrimage to the recently-deceased poet's tomb, Fiona Stafford concludes that Burns was a particularly key inspiration for writers living outside the wealthy urban centres (Stafford, 'Scottish Poetry' 359). Anderson, an aspiring poet and immigrant within the textile community of County Antrim, was a subscriber to Thomson's *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793), and shared with Thomson in the contemporary fascination with Burns's regional expression and ability to capture human emotion. Anderson's fame as a poet is strongly tied to the ethnographic interest of his readership; like Wordsworth, Anderson introduced Cumbrian dialect words into his poetry, supplying his readers with a series of helpful notes, particularly to benefit regional readerships outside of England. His fellow Cumbrian predecessor Susanna Blamire (1747-1794), a poet featured prominently in Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803), had incorporated both Scots and Cumbrian vocabulary into her verses and featured on several occasions in the Belfast newspapers between 1800 and 1812.

Anderson is perhaps the most transnational labouring-class figure of the Thomson circle, having spent time in London and Scotland before eventually settling in Carnmoney, County Antrim. His entry into the Thomson circle in the first decade of the nineteenth century had far-reaching consequences for the circle's position in British Romanticism. By the time he published in the Belfast press in 1807, Anderson had already enjoyed a literary reputation in his native England as author of *Poems on Various Subjects* (1798), a collection of poems in English, Scots and Cumbrian, and *Ballads in the Cumberland Dialect* (Carlisle: 1805) the publication that propelled him to fame as the 'Cumerland (sic) Balladeer'. This was reprinted a number of times, including in the form of the two-volume *Poetical works* (1820) which included an autobiography and numbered William Wordsworth and Robert Southey among its subscribers. Anderson's role within the Thomson circle helped to define the movement as a working-class coterie; the single letter that survives from Anderson of 1812 refers to Samuel Thomson 'toiling at the "Loom of Posey"' (J. Orr, *Correspondence* 184),

strikingly foreshadowing John Hewitt's grouping of the Ulster vernacular poets as the 'rhyming weavers'.

Anderson's collected poems of 1820 share some of the characteristics of his labouring-class predecessors of the Thomson circle, demonstrating the typical modesty topos expected of the labouring-class poet, in addition to the assertion of a popular mandate behind the republishing of his works:

I have not the vanity to imagine the contents will amuse an enlightened reader; yet, should a few feel gratified on perusing the effusions of an unlettered Author, it will be a simple, but sufficient proof, that his time hath not been altogether misspent. [...] Never was it my intention to publish the work about to be offered to the public; but such was the wish of my numerous friends, merely to serve an Author, whose highest ambition has been to paint the simple scenery of nature, and describe truly the manners and customs of his native country. To the will of such, my pride shall ever be to bow with cheerfulness. (R. Anderson, *Poetical Works* x)

The circumstances of the 1820 edition of Anderson's works offer insight into the changes that labouring-class print culture had undergone since the confident, radical spirit of 1790s Belfast. In contrast to the self-authored prefaces of earlier poets such as Orr and Thomson, an 'Address to the Reader' is added by editor Thomas Sanderson, eager to emphasise Anderson's own admission that the edition was produced solely by the subscription of the 'friends of Mr Anderson' in order to 'save from distress, a poor Bard, now in the decline of life' (Anderson, *Poetical Works* v). Furthermore, Sanderson claims that his contact with Anderson originated purely in order to provide detail about the nature of the Cumberland peasantry and biographical details of the poet himself, demonstrating an overarching ethnographic market that governed the reprinting of Anderson's poetry. The lengthy prefatory biography, penned by the poet himself, gives a retrospective account of the poet's formative moments in the Cumberland region, further emphasising Sanderson's role as editor, particularly as author of the extensive 'Notes to the Cumberland Ballads' which reinterprets Anderson's ballads as genuine artefacts of Cumberland folk culture. Later editions of Anderson's work, such as the 1933 Centenary volume which emphasised his Cumberland regional credentials, would completely efface the importance of Anderson's experiences in both London and Ireland. Here, his verses were chiefly celebrated for preserving the nostalgic state of the Cumberland countryside in the early nineteenth century:

We watch his efforts to make up for his defective education, and his eager pursuit of that real knowledge of his country and people that was to stand him in better stead than any learning acquired from books ... Thanks to Anderson we see once more the life of a Cumbrian village ... [and] the whole life of the Cumbrian peasant[.] (Anderson, 1933, p. 5)

Needless to say, Brown's assertion of Anderson's bardic relationship to his native Cumberland serves to completely obscure his early career in Ulster, the details of which are passed over with a simple reference to 'Ireland [...] where he became addicted to intemperance' (Anderson, 1933, p. 10). It was perhaps against a growing sense of this reception that James Orr expressed to Samuel Thomson that he 'wish[ed] "B[ally]carry Fair", in particular, had never been written' (J. Orr, *Correspondence* 155), as the song was frequently cited as a means to locate him, and his Ulster contemporaries, within an imitative tradition of Burnsian folk revelry.

Indeed, Anderson's London years detail the poet's formative clashes with a contemporary metropolitan fashion for Celtic song and poetry which he describes as 'a mock pastoral Scottish style':

We felt equally disgusted with many of the songs ... and supposing myself capable of producing what might by the public be considered equal, or perhaps, on the following day I wrote four, viz. 'Lucy Gray of Allendale,' 'I Sigh for the Girl I adore,' 'The lovely brown Maid' and 'Ellen and I'. 'Lucy Gray' was my first attempt at poetical composition; and was suggested by hearing a Northumbrian rustic relate the story of the unfortunate lovers. She was the toast of the neighbourhood; and to use the simple language of my Northumbrian friend, 'Monie a smart canny lad wad hae gane far efter dark, aye through fire and water, just to get a luik at her.' ... These songs I offered to my friend, Mr Hook, a composer of celebrity. They were set to music by him; and my first poetic effusion was sung by Master Phelps, at Vauxhall, in 1794.' (Anderson, xxv)

Anderson obviously regarded his London years as the high point of his career, where he was given the opportunity to mix with members of the opposite sex and enjoy the arts but, crucially, he frames his metropolitan experience as the catalyst to his appreciation of 'the manners of the Cumbrian peasantry' which 'was now greater than ever' (xxviii). This is closely followed with thanks to the poet's 'respectable and learned friend, Mr. THOMAS SANDERSON [who] encouraged me to other attempts in the same species of poetry'. Though Sanderson's concern as Anderson's editor with local culture might appear to offset

the poet's artistic agency, Anderson's sense of his own exceptionality is clear within his memoir; his account of formative childhood experiences echo Wordsworth's *Prelude*, emphasising the artistic value of childhood play during 'Summer excursions, [where] an attachment to rural scenery first stole over my youthful mind.' At other times, he reflects on his experiences of labouring-class education and socialisation, refracted through a sense of his own exceptionalism: 'Oft did I get the halfpenny to spend, that could ill be spent, besides experiencing indulgences unknown to my brothers and sisters.' While weighing up the moral rectitude of parental favouritism, Anderson applies his personal experience to a wider social question: whether the encouraging behaviour of his parents towards his education, which stimulated him to aspire to greater pursuits, contrasts favourably with the 'harsh treatment ... [which] drive[s] many to wretchedness, prostitution and the gallows.' (Anderson xiv) Thus, Anderson concludes, parental indulgence of individual talent is the microcosmic expression of public, regional philanthropic beneficence, notably his education at a Charity School which was supported by the Dean of Carlisle; culminating in his praise for 'encouragers ... who place the offspring of the labouring-classes in the true road to knowledge and to happiness in a future state!' (Anderson, xiv)

These implicit political leanings strengthen towards the end of the Preface when Anderson dwells heavily on his financial losses as a result of the subscription process, supposedly a 'democratic' means to allow working class poets to publish without an advance. His narrative presents this as the experience which necessitated his move to Ireland in 1796, but not before his famous pilgrimage to the tomb of Robert Burns, during which he has opportunity to lament Burns's supposed neglect at the hands of critics. According to Anderson's narrative, this fraternal empathy beyond the grave inspired him to write two new songs which were published 'immediately on ... arrival in Belfast', as if the seemingly ghostly inspiration experienced at the tomb of Burns effectively enabled Anderson's admission into Ulster's literary circles. Again, Anderson is at pains to stress his exceptionality: while he 'enjoy[ed] the society of some literary characters,' he also endured 'too many pretenders to merit,' an accusation later levelled by Alex M'Kenzie at the members of the Percy salon, jockeying for the Bishop's attention and patronage:

Some to the top with straining step ascend,  
Frowning defiance on their peers below;  
Some deftly round the spiral pathway wend,  
Jostling and gibing onward as they go,  
Striving by turns each other down to throw,  
And glorying at the hapless struggler's fall,  
Who rolling headlong to the nether moat,  
Vents on the laughing victor words of gall,

And vows revenge—for lo! His fine new coat  
Is so defiled with dirt, at home he dares not shew't.  
(‘The Mount of Dromore’, 1814, *Belfast News Letter*, 8 Nov. 1814)

M’Kenzie’s dissatisfaction reflects the fact that few of Ulster’s Romantic working class poets made a reliable profit from the subscription process, with the exception of James Orr of Ballycarry who described his satisfaction to Samuel Thomson in a letter of 1804: ‘In reply to your question how I succeeded with my publication – you have read the subscription list, and the printers were not immoderate in their demands’ (J. Orr, *Correspondence* 155). Thomson’s volume of 1799 had been less successful, in spite of a local gentleman Samuel Thompson of Muckamore acting as a literary agent for him in London, (J. Orr, *Correspondence* 138) and he continued to experience frustration at the hands of correspondents who failed to meet their promise to distribute his 1806 volume (J. *Correspondence* 181). The trajectory traceable from Thomson’s prefaces of the 1790s to Anderson’s Preface of 1820 is that of the growing necessity of middle and upper class patronage and a decline in the power of the working class coterie, generally. Post-industrial critics have tended to group labouring-class poets together under the broad category of ‘northern’, focusing on the vernacularity and folk-culture elements. Ulster working class literature of the Romantic period suffered a double blow: the poets were viewed as encapsulating or preserving a dying rural culture and, in the case of the Thomson circle, a defeated, Dissenting Protestant, form of Irish republicanism; and for some, the poets’ vernacular language became associated with the colonialism of the Scottish planter tradition and was attributed not to any independent or legitimate variety of Irish culture but to a ‘slavish ... imitat[ion] [of] Burns’ (D. J. O’Donoghue, 1895, 20-22). These tensions are increasingly evident in the nineteenth-century prefaces of the circle. In short, in order to fully appreciate Ireland’s labouring-class poetic traditions, it is necessary to think beyond the concept of ‘the nation’. Though by no means a perfect classification, studies of ‘labouring-class poetry’ have recognised the Ulster’s poets’ important literary role beyond the national paradigm, recognising their contribution to a longer tradition of working class literature. Cultural hybridity was by no means unusual in the early decades of the nineteenth-century; like their Romantic contemporaries, many Ulstermen, both middle-class University students and labouring-class readers, felt connected to an ‘eighteenth-century [Enlightenment] ideological community’, which comprised ‘a common ground of ideas and assumptions, firmly anchored in religion, culture and politics’ (E. McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland* 1). Perhaps ironically, this resulted from the Ulster Romantics’ paradoxical status as penalised non-conformists and vernacular-speaking labourers on the one hand and their more

problematic, arguably privileged, position as descendants of Scottish migrants, some of whom were complicit in the British imperial project of the Ulster Plantation. However, the categorisation of ‘planter’ and ‘native’ is reductive in light of the fact that Scottish-Irish relations were shaped by centuries of traffic between Ireland and Britain dating back to prehistoric times (T. Devine, ‘Caledonian Connection’ 3-15), creating a distinctive region in the nine counties of Ulster which pre-existed the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland. So long as political motivation continues to pervade the national paradigm, transnationalism will offer a particularly helpful theoretical framework, a ‘third way’ even, by which to assess Ulster working class literature of the Romantic period, reflecting how poets like Thomson fashioned themselves. Though this approach is arguably not without its own political bias, it not only looks at movement across physical boundaries, but also the crossing of cultural and ideological boundaries within a small landmass.

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